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Problems and strategies for improving the non-formal learning accreditation system in Taiwan

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Abstract

Learning accreditation has a long history in Europe and North America. The accreditation promotion experience among advanced countries are deserved to be learned. Taiwan also has considerable experiences in relation to technical and vocational education system, community colleges, and other adult education institutions. The research method of the study is literature searches and document analysis. We used definitions and theoretical concepts associated with accreditation as a foundation for examining the deficiencies in the Taiwanese non-formal learning accreditation system. Furthermore, based on the accreditation promotion experience among the advanced countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we proposed a number of specific recommendations for learning accreditation reform in Taiwan.

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1. Introduction

Learning accreditation in adult education typically refers to the act of seeking recognition from authoritative institutions or experts for the learning outcomes of various non-formal and informal learning systems outside of the formal education system. This recognition renders these learning outcomes as effective as formal learning outcomes. Non-formal learning accreditation aims to provide students with additional and fair learning opportunities through flexible education and reform systems. Specifically for adult learners outside the school education system who are

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school dropouts or were excluded from formal education systems, a flexible and diverse learning accreditation provides them with second chances to become members of the formal education system and obtain comprehensive learning qualifications.

The definitions, scope, methods, and institutions handling learning accreditation are diverse. Learning accreditation has a long history in Europe and North America. Taiwan also has considerable experiences in relation to technical and vocational education system, community colleges, and other adult education institutions. However, the definitions, scope, policies, and integration of accreditation vary. Therefore, the promotion of accreditation in the lifelong learning system remains disputed, and, thus, an extensive investigation on the promotion and improvement of the accreditation system is necessary. In this study, we used definitions and theoretical concepts associated with accreditation as a foundation for examining the deficiencies in the Taiwanese non-formal learning accreditation system. Furthermore, based on the accreditation promotion experience among the advanced countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we proposed a number of specific recommendations for learning accreditation reform in Taiwan.

2. Method

The research method of this study is literature and document analysis. Literature search involves reviewing materials including internal program report, on-line data bases and other relevant lifelong publications.

3. Origins and review of the Taiwanese non-formal learning accreditation system

The Lifelong Learning Act announced in 2002 finally provided a legal basis for the promotion of lifelong learning in Taiwan. It also eliminated the polarization between formal and non-formal education. Article 16 of the Lifelong Learning Act clearly defines the accreditation of learning achievements: “To encourage the willingness of members of the public to participate in lifelong learning, the central competent authority shall establish learning achievement certification systems for informal education learning activities, to serve as a reference basis for recognition in school admissions or for consideration in job promotion evaluations. The establishment of the learning achievement certification systems referred to in the preceding paragraph shall include curriculum approval, recognition of learning achievements, the period of validity of credits, conditions for recognition in admissions, and other related matters. The regulations therefore shall be prescribed by the central competent authority.” In 2003, the Ministry of Education officially issued the Non-Formal Education and Learning Achievement Accreditation Scheme. Based on this scheme, the Non-Formal Education Programs Accreditation Board was established to devise mechanisms for promoting the accreditation of non-formal learning achievements. The Research Center for Adult Education at the National Taiwan Normal University was entrusted with assisting in accreditation-related tasks and issued a number of related measures, including Fee Standards for Non-Formal Education Programs Accreditation, the Establishment of the Non-Formal Education Programs Accreditation Center, and Guidelines for the Accreditation of Non-Formal Education Programs.

According to the aforementioned regulations, the Non-Formal Education Programs Accreditation Center has five main tasks:

- To guide lifelong learning institutions in accreditation applications.
- To receive, review, and register matters related to the accreditation of non-formal education programs.
- To evaluate non-formal education programs for certificates of accreditation.
- To issue, revoke, or annul certifications of accreditation and academic credit for non-formal education programs.

The curriculum framework and principles for the accreditation of non-formal education programs are as follows:

- Scope of program accreditation: To establish accreditation of credit courses in the humanities, arts, social, and technological fields at the associate or bachelor level.
- Effective period of accredited programs: The effective period of non-formal education programs accredited by the accreditation center is 3 years. Programs that wish to continue after this period must reapply for accreditation.
- Application method: Online applications are preferred. Written applications are secondary.

- Eligible institutions: All lifelong learning institutions are eligible (because of restrictions in human resources and funding, most lifelong learning accreditation is currently for nonprofit organizations).

Accreditations were held 29 times between the end of 2006 and January 2014, approving 1,077 programs, yielding 2,665 academic credits. Among the four main fields, humanities programs received the most accreditations, followed by art, natural science, and social fields. The applying institutions included community colleges, foundations, and nonprofit organizations. Government labor education courses have also received accreditation. Community colleges applications were approved more than those of other institutions, accounting for approximately 70% of the total applications.

In summary, Taiwan's current pilot system of accreditation for non-formal learning achievements has the following merits (Huang, 2005):

- It accords with progressive, experimental principles and limits areas, scope, and duration of managements.
- Scholars and experts in related disciplines are hired to approve programs.
- It accords with academic specifications at the college level, facilitating convergence with university education.
- Procedures are simple and clear and a system for reconsideration applications has been established.
- Associated measures, including regulatory amendments, incentives, and advocacy, are available.
- It provides an additional channel for adult higher education.

However, the accreditation system for non-formal learning achievements does have several shortcomings (Huang, 2005; Research Center for Adult Education at the National Taiwan Normal University, 2013):

- The accreditation schemes and the pilot system are restricted to the accreditation of certain programs. By restricting learning achievements to single disciplines, the system is inconsistent with the spirit of the Lifelong Learning Act.
- The accrediting institutions can only passively accept applications for non-formal education units. Only fragmented discipline learning programs (syllabi) are passed, which hinders the development of systematic and complete curriculum programs for learning.
- Accreditation operations are entrusted to universities and national academic and educational bodies. Currently, only a single handling unit is commissioned to handle these operations, which limited the penetration rate and effectiveness of accreditation processes.
- The effective period of accreditation for non-formal education programs is brief (i.e., 3 years).
- The accreditation scheme for learning achievements in non-formal education divides eligible programs into credit courses and program courses. However, the implementers are clearly partial to credit courses. Additionally, the program courses involve objectives and characteristics among different applying institutions. A consensus on objectives and standards for similar programs has yet to be established.
- Application for accreditation is restricted to social education institutions, community colleges, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations, whereas for-profit social organizations and business groups are, unfortunately, not considered.

4. Importance, theories, and models of non-formal learning accreditation

Definitions and classification methods in the current education system must be understood to address the importance of learning accreditation. The figure below shows a comparison of formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning.

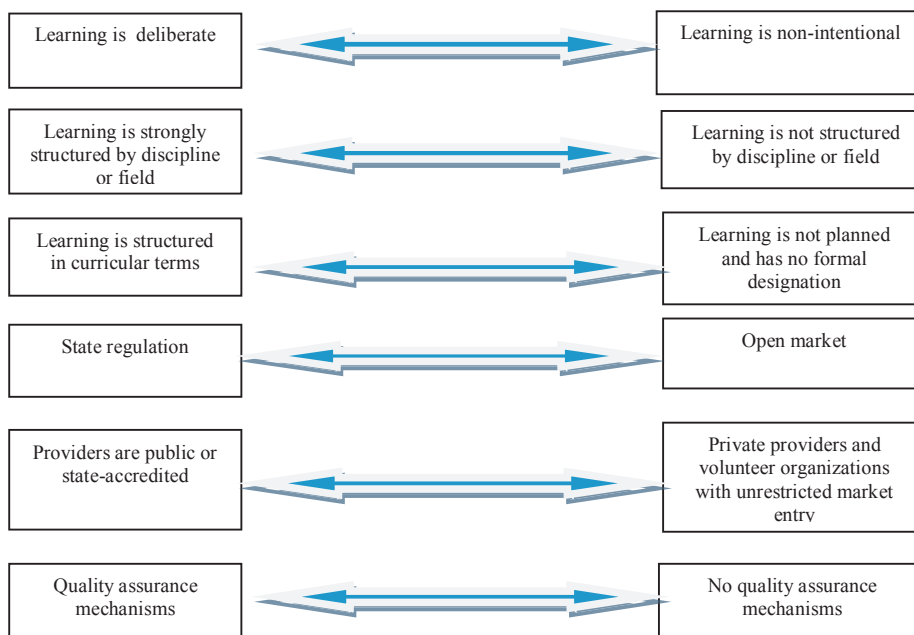


Fig. 1. The continuum of formal to informal learning.
Source: Werquin, 2010:25

Fig. 1 illustrates that formal, non-formal, and informal learning only differ slightly. Werquin (2010) considered formal learning to be intentional, structural, and controlled. Formal, non-formal, and informal learning differ clearly in terms of strengths and weaknesses, and non-formal learning exists between formal and informal learning. Whether this definition and discussion can explain the phenomena and circumstances occurring in other countries requires further investigation. However, what we could contemplate is which roles are suitable for a country's government to play in the non-formal learning system.

In the current era, learning is no longer strictly divided into formal, non-formal, and informal education. Therefore, including learning outside of formal education within the development of lifelong learning is crucial. In other words, a mechanism for the accreditation of non-formal learning outcomes is necessary and would include fixed procedures and methods by which entitled persons could issue supporting documents to learners (Yang, 2004). The accreditation of non-formal learning has the following functions (Hwang, 2005):

- **Recognizing Individual Learning Achievement:** The accreditation of individual learning achievements is unquestionably the recognition of individual learning, as well as the attainment of recognition from other people or society. This recognition substantially encourages individuals to engage in learning activities.
- **Establishing a Bridge for Communication Between Formal and Non-Formal Learning:** In Europe and North America, a number of universities acknowledge the work experiences or learning outcomes of adults returning to higher education. This establishes a bridge between formal and non-formal learning, allowing learning to develop and advance on existing foundations in order to enhance learning efficiency and effects.
- **Facilitating the Achievement of Lifelong Learning Goals:** Advanced countries in Europe and North America have adopted legislative approaches or used policy statements and plans to commit to building lifelong learning societies. A number of countries have also implemented a variety of accreditation systems in their actual strategies for encouraging learning among adults, thereby realizing the specific objectives of lifelong learning.

According to Butterworth (1992) and Colardyn (1996), systems currently used for the accreditation of learning achievements can be roughly divided into the following five models:

- **The Individual-Oriented Model:** This model involves assessment centers accrediting individuals' knowledge

acquired from programs, other educational institutions, or experiential learning. This accreditation aims to (a) provide permanent records of individuals' recognized knowledge; (b) provide individuals with proof of recognition when engaging in further formal education or schooling; and (c) allow individuals to understand their professional, educational, social, and cultural human capital. Consequently, integration with formal education allows academic credits to be accumulated for obtaining diplomas.

- **The Program-Oriented Model:** This model focused not on accrediting individuals but on accrediting specific educational or training programs. The qualification of a program depends on the program length and quality and not on the organization providing or handling the program. This model establishes a connection between formal education and experiential learning.
- **The Integration-Oriented Model:** This model compares formal education certificates with proof obtained from non-formal education or training and combines the two into a new qualification. This method uses academic credit recognition mechanisms, integrating formal education with experiential learning and training programs. This facilitates the development of a longitudinal system that increases an individual's mobility between education and profession.
- **The Credit Exchange Model:** This model was established by the U.K. National Council for Vocational Qualification. Simply by presenting proof of learning achievements for a program and upon receiving approval from evaluators, applicants are given academic credits; thus, their previous achievements are converted into academic credits. This model is also called the competence-based or the product-based model. In other words, when individuals in the occupational hierarchy system require a level of ability for a certain job or role, they can obtain academic credits through the accreditation of prior experiences.
- **The Developmental Model:** This model was developed by the U.K. Council for National Academic Awards, which established the credit accumulation and transfer scheme that enables learners to transfer their program credits between institutions. This model posits that the recognition of previous experience is highly developmental because learners' experiences are not merely learning resources; they are meaningful. Therefore, the accreditation of academic achievements can be achieved only through the process of describing experiences through to recognizing experiences. In this model, learners must present learning lists, records, or related files, such as reflections on their experiences and dialogues between learners and teachers, to establish and strengthen the understanding of and reflection on the evidence of learning.

The first three of these five models involves the subjects of accreditation, whereas the last two focus on learning institutions. Each model has its own characteristics, where the integration-oriented and developmental models stress the scope of non-formal learning accreditation and learner needs. Thus, governments should consider the feasibility of establishing such models when formulating lifelong learning policies.

5. Characteristics and reflections on the learning accreditation (recognition) experiences of the OECD countries

Werquin (2010) presented the following seven trend observations and recommendations for the public policy choices of each country:

- **The Observed Development Trends Indicate That All Countries are Advancing From Simple Accreditation (Recognition) Models to Complex Integrated Systems:** Although the majority of countries have formulated blueprints for their final stages of development, only a small number have reached these final stages.
- **Organizing Institutionalized Communication and Promoting the Transparency of Accreditation (Recognition) is Essential:** Countries can establish groups and accreditation (recognition) centers to strengthen information, counseling, and guidance functions. This would allow systems to attend to the career development and orientation of every individual who would then clearly understand the services that accreditation (recognition) frameworks can offer. Communication with essential affiliates is critical; for example, interactions between governments, enterprises, and academia can facilitate the establishment of an accreditation (recognition) framework and consistent official policy position.

- **Making Non-Formal and Informal Learning Outcomes Accreditation (Recognition) Part of the Lifelong Learning Mechanism:** Integrating the education system, which emphasizes academic diplomas, with vocational training and adult learning to form a single accreditation (recognition) framework is essential. This strategy involves universities recognizing partial learning outcomes and fully incorporating them into the accreditation (recognition) system. In addition, such a system could encourage accreditation (recognition) for minorities (e.g., aborigines) and new immigrants.
- **Improving Accreditation (Recognition) Procedures and Processes:** Integrating accreditation (recognition) with existing qualification standards is essential. This strategy includes ensuring quality assessments of formal and non-formal learning outcomes, developing a variety of assessment tools, training evaluators, standardizing accreditation (recognition) procedures, and comprehensively assessing the quality and quantity of learning outcome accreditation (recognition).
- **Promoting the Accreditation (Recognition) of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Outcomes:** This includes providing national accreditation (recognition) directories, establishing partnerships with various institutions, ensuring consistency between official policies and actions, paying close attention to labor market needs, recognizing a broader range of competences, and making the accreditation (recognition) systems more sustainable.
- **Promoting Data Collection and Research Activities:** A lack of appropriate, specific data is an obvious shortcoming in the promotion of an accreditation (recognition) system. Collecting data over time and converting data into a knowledge database facilitate research and analysis and enhance the effectiveness of accreditation (recognition). In addition, systematic research and analysis on the impact and effectiveness of accreditation (recognition) is necessary for improving accreditation (recognition) systems.
- **Identifying Costs and Benefits of Accreditation (Recognition):** West (2007) and Werquin (2007) have developed two normative models for the benefits of accreditation (recognition). The first analyzes the accreditation (recognition) of formal and informal learning outcomes in terms of costs and benefits. The second examines the comparative costs of accreditation (recognition), formal education, and vocational training to determine the most obvious natural alternatives in the human capital field. Accreditation (recognition) has positive benefits and diverse outcomes. Nevertheless, financial investment and human and material resources must be considered when establishing an accreditation (recognition) system.

Studies on the accreditation (recognition) of non-formal and informal learning outcomes in OECD countries have revealed the following commonalities (Werquin, 2010:7–12):

- Accreditation (Recognition) of Non-formal and informal learning outcomes is high on policy agendas and can enhance the visibility and value of human capitals in society.
- Accreditation (Recognition) gives non-formal and informal learning outcomes greater value for further formal learning.
- Accreditation (Recognition) gives non-formal and informal learning outcomes greater value in the labor market.
- Accreditation (Recognition) encompasses several steps of increasing formalization.
- Accreditation (Recognition) generates a number of benefits: (a) economic benefits; (b) educational benefits; (c) social benefits; and (d) self-affirmation of individual value.
- Accreditation (Recognition) can enhance and improve equity in society.
- Accreditation (Recognition) is generally marginal, small scale, and not yet sustainable.
- Concrete communications and discussions on accreditation (recognition) of learning outcomes are needed among relevant interest groups.
- Accreditation (Recognition) processes can be improved when integrated into lifelong learning policies.
- Accreditation (Recognition) processes and related procedures should be improved.
- Accreditation (Recognition) has benefits but also requires considerable amount of investments and costs.
- The challenge of accreditation (recognition) for policy makers is seeking the right balance.

6. Conclusions--reflections on and future development in non-formal learning accreditation

Taiwan's experiences in promoting non-formal learning show that deficiencies remain in aspects of practical integration, data integration, and research information. We recommend the following improvements:

- **Establish a National Lifelong Learning Accreditation Committee Focused on Educational Reform and Lifelong Learning:** The Non-Formal Education Programs Accreditation Center at the National Taiwan Normal University has implemented an accreditation program for more than 7 years. However, various parties have questioned the benefits of accreditation for academic credit and the effectiveness of participation in the accreditation institution. The vocational education system currently has its own accreditation methods. The Program for Autonomous Learning among Workers formulated by the Ministry of Labor is an example of a learning accreditation mechanism. This program uses the Taiwan Training Quality System with partial subsidization to develop a variety of credit and noncredit programs and also has separate accreditation methods and channels. The purpose of a Lifelong Learning Accreditation Committee is to review domestic laws primarily involving the integration and interface issues with higher education, technical and vocational education, and lifelong learning laws, to resolve fundamental problems existing in non-formal learning accreditation systems.
- **Small-Scale Accreditations Currently In Progress Should Not Be Neglected:** The Non-Formal Learning Achievement Accreditation conducted by the learning accreditation center at the National Taiwan Normal University, the Program for Autonomous Learning Among Workers conducted by the Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training under the Ministry of Labor, and the Accreditation for School Operation and Public Participation of community colleges differ substantially in terms of focuses, directions, and concepts. Nevertheless, from a standpoint of lifelong learning and human capitals, the methods adopted by each institution can be linked or integrated. Therefore, these small-scale, experimental accreditation systems should continue.
- **Data Collection and Research on International and Domestic Accreditation Experiences Should Be Strengthened:** A number of countries have had valuable experiences in their promotion of learning accreditation. However, the political, economic, and cultural backgrounds of these countries, as well as their legal frameworks and administrative organizational operations, differ substantially. Even if certain countries possess effective experiences, we cannot entirely transplant them to Taiwan. Therefore, in-depth research and analysis must be conducted to identify foreign experiences and models that are applicable to Taiwan.
- **Establish Accreditation Brands and Enhance Accreditation Effectiveness:** Issues concerning quality control must be assessed by scholars and experts. Nevertheless, accreditation must seek a balance between quality and quantity, and concentrated efforts must be devoted to establishing appropriate accreditation assessment tools and developing reliable and valid accreditation based on systematic frameworks. Moreover, partnerships between accreditation institutions can be established by formulating policy incentives, legal encouragement, and financial support and sponsorship. Approval of accreditation and individual learning achievements by enterprises, universities, and civil society groups can also enhance the effectiveness of accreditation.
- **Establish Partnerships between Accreditation Institutions and Primary Stakeholders:** As described above, the methods of domestic accreditation institutions differ, and interaction and communication between these agencies are also lacking. Therefore, mechanisms for encouraging relationship building must be introduced in related projects. By offering financial subsidies, incentives for interested parties, and flexible accreditation mechanisms, the relationship between accreditation partners can be enhanced and effective communication platforms can be established, thereby developing an integrated system of learning accreditation beneficial to lifelong learners.
- **Adjust the Current Operating Model of the Non-Formal Accreditation Center:** The experimental approach of the Non-Formal Education Program Accreditation Center at the National Taiwan University should be adjusted. Currently, the small-scale funding hinders the expansion of accreditation businesses, including the development and establishment of databases, research and development of accreditation, and the formulation of action strategies for accreditation partnerships, all of which require considerable expenses. Additionally, according to the commission agreement with the Ministry of Education, accreditation charges must be surrendered to the national treasury, which prevents projects from using funds flexibly. Consequently, this

suppresses the effectiveness of learning achievement accreditation under circumstances when human resources are limited and regulations are overly stringent.

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